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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Who Are You?”

Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The media like to tell us who we are. Who’s a kook and who’s a messiah. Who should be listened to and who shouldn’t. If you were born between this date and that date, then this is who you are and how you are and think and act. If you live in that place, then you’re one of them. Seems like they’ve got it all figured out.

Until someone like John comes along. John the Baptist. Someone they can’t figure out. He’s not from around here. He acts funny, talks funny, eats funny, and dresses funny. The writers for the Jerusalem Gazette couldn’t pin him down. Neither could the priests and levites. Is he the Christ? Elijah? The promised prophet greater than Moses? Who is this guy?

What they did know is that the people were voting with their feet. They were going out to John in droves - from Jerusalem, Judea, and all the region (Matthew 3:5). And listening to him. Why? Who is he and why is he baptizing?

Well John knew who he was. No confusion on his part. No he is not the Christ. No he is not Elijah. No he is not the promised prophet greater than Moses. No, no, and no.

And he doesn’t give the expected answer either. The traditional answer would have been: I am John, the son of the priest Zechariah, who is the son of . . . who is the son of . . .

But John doesn’t say that. Instead he says who he is on the basis of God’s Word. He is the one Isaiah the prophet spoke of: ***the voice crying out in the wilderness; the one preparing the way of the Lord.*** John knew. John was not confused, but confident. The Word of God made him confident.

And I think that says something to our world today. To you and me, too. Because it seems like our world is - and sometimes *we* are - in the midst of a huge identity crisis. *Who are you? Who am I?* People want to know.

It has become fashionable today to say that who you are is who you define yourself to be; who you think yourself to be - even if that goes against the physical characteristics of

your body. Yet, I was telling the Bible Class last week, at the same time people are saying that who you are is who you say you are, who you think you are, at the same time mail order DNA kits are becoming more popular than ever. To tell you who you are, where you are from, on the basis of your body. People are confused.

Or, people define themselves by what they do, or what they have, or what they have achieved. But what then happens when you can no longer do what you do, you lose what you have, or your achievements fall apart? Then what? Then who are you?

John's way is better. **That who you are is who God says you are.** John was the voice. John was the preparer. For someone greater than he. Someone he was not even worthy to approach on hands and knees and untie his sandal. That one, when He came (as we heard last week), would baptize too - but His baptism would be greater, for He would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And with that, we find out who you are. For you are not in the crowd of those baptized by John - you are one who has been baptized by the one greater than John. You have been baptized by Jesus, with His baptism, and with the Holy Spirit. And that makes you a child of God. Or as the verses that we *didn't* read from John today say, those verses in the middle of those we did read: *you were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God* (John 1:12-13).

That's who you are. That's who God says you are. His child.

It's easy, though, for that truth to get drowned out. Instead of the Word of God and the water and words of your baptism drowning out the world, the noise and words of the world drown out what God is saying to us. And so instead of confident, we get confused. We get *spiritual amnesia*. We forget who we are.

So Advent calls us back. Back to the Word of God. To listen to Him. And to hear of this greater one John talked about.

Thing is: Jesus didn't *look* all that great. And the reaction was: Who? Him? The guy from Nazareth? Why, He even insisted that John baptize Him! But then He spoke the Word of God like no one else. He did the Word of God like no one else. And He showed His greatness in that even though He was the one John wasn't even worthy to crawl to on His hands and knees and untie His sandals, He came to us - unworthy as we are - to serve us. Not to untie our sandals, but to untie us from our sins, to break the cords of death and the grave, and to make us nobodies, somebody. To make us children of God.

And so we remember that at Christmas. When the Son of God came all the way down to the manger to serve us. And then went even lower than that - all the way down to the cross and the grave. So that in His resurrection, He raise us to a new life.

So who are you? Someone Jesus did that for! And that is greater than anything you could do or be or accomplish on your own.

But John reminds us, too, that greater things are still to come. Just as Jesus' birth was to prepare Him for His death and resurrection, so too our birth as children of God is not just for here and now, but to prepare us for our own death and then our own resurrection to life again. In Jesus. When the promise made to us in His Baptism is finally and completely fulfilled. Greater things are still to come.

And that's important for us to remember when life here and now gets us down. When the problems of life start to drown us and overwhelm us. When what the world says we are or should be doesn't seem very good at all. When Christmas doesn't seem so merry and the lights don't seem too bright. John is still pointing us to the greater one. The one who isn't just greater than we, but the one who is greater than our problems and worries, greater than our struggles and doubts, greater than whatever bad news came this year or may come in the next. This greater one not only coming, but coming now for you. With His forgiveness, with His life, with His hope, for you.

And He comes to you with all this today, as the one whose sandals John was not worthy to untie comes and feeds you with His Body and Blood. The one greater than sin forgives your sin. The one greater than death gives you life. The one whose word is truth gives you hope. For the world changes and things come and go, but He will *never leave you or forsake you* (Hebrews 13:5).

Which, again, is contrary to what you might hear. Maybe even what you think and feel . . . when life takes a turn for the worst. When it seems that maybe your sin is too great, that your Saviour has left you or forsaken you.

But when you think that, feel that, hear that, or start to believe that, do what John did. Don't let that noise drown out God's Word, but let God's water and Word drown out that noise. That you know who you are. For He who joined Himself to you and your flesh and blood, will not divorce Himself from you. He cannot. He made you His child. And so His child you are, who He may discipline, but who He will never stop loving and forgiving.

And knowing that effects how you live . . . just like John. They couldn't figure him out. He not from around here; not like us. Acts funny, talks funny, eats funny, and dresses funny.

Wouldn't it be great to be "Johns" today, different in how we act and talk and live? Like Paul wrote to the Thessalonians - what if we did that? ***Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances - all circumstances, not just the ones we like. Hold fast what is good and abstain from every form of evil.*** And so people came up to

us and asked: *Who are you?* And like John, we could tell them. Of the greater one who is coming, who is here, and who has made us who we are - His children. And who wants them, too. To baptize them, to feed them, to make them His children.

And if you think: *I can't do that!* Maybe you're right. But the greater one can. The greater one who lives in you. Or as Paul also wrote today: ***He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.***

So we sang in the Introit today: ***Let me hear what God the Lord will speak*** - let me hear His Word - ***for He will speak peace to his people, to his saints;*** - peace, forgiveness, to child-of-God-you! - ***but let them not turn back to folly*** - to what the world says is true, if it contradicts what God's Word says. Let the Word of God speak and teach and tell you who you are, and of the greater one.

And then we prayed: *Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation.* The darkness of our hearts. Shatter the darkness of sin and doubt with the light of forgiveness and truth. That we be not confused, but confident, like John. Knowing who we are. Believing and speaking the powerful Word that has been spoken to us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.